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C O N F I D E N T I A L COLOMBO 001169

SIPDIS

STATE FOR SA/INS AND DRL/IRF
NSC FOR DORMANDY
USPACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/05/2015

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: GOVERNMENT ANTI-CONVERSION BILL MOVES
TO FIRST BASE IN PARLIAMENTARY PROCESS

REF: A. COLOMBO 0742

[1](#)B. COLOMBO 0572

Classified By: AMB. JEFFREY J. LUNSTEAD. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

[1](#)1. (SBU) According to D.W. Abeywickrema, Secretary at the Ministry of Buddhist Affairs, the Government-drafted anti-conversion bill, which was approved by the Cabinet in March (Ref B), was sent to the Government Printer on July 5 for publication in the Parliamentary Gazette. (Note: Being "gazetted" is a proposed bill's first step in the parliamentary process.) Abeywickrema told poloff that he expects the second step--presentation of the topic at the parliamentary party leaders' meeting--to occur on July 19. .

[1](#)2. (SBU) When asked why the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) had chosen this particular moment to move ahead with its bill, Abeywickrema attributed the time lag between Cabinet approval and gazette notification to unspecified "administrative delays." He confirmed that Buddhist Affairs Minister Ratnasiri Wickremenayake had issued the order to send the bill for notification.

[1](#)3. (C) On July 6 the Ambassador contacted Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar, an opponent of the legislation, to ask why the GSL, its representations to us to the contrary (Ref A), appeared to be moving ahead with this draft. Kadirgamar said he had also heard only the day before that the bill had been gazetted, adding that he was puzzled as to why--particularly since he had assured us that the President had said she would not allow it to go to Parliament. Kadirgamar said he would try to discuss the matter with President Kumaratunga--who, he speculated, might be similarly unaware of the step--in a meeting scheduled the next day.

[1](#)4. (C) Comment: In a rare example of bipartisan consensus, the President and the Opposition Leader both had previously assured the Ambassador that they do not support and will not push anti-conversion legislation. Gazetting a bill is only the first step in what can be a lengthy parliamentary process; many opportunities remain for the controversial draft to be buried, quashed, consigned to committee, or otherwise killed. Nonetheless, it is disturbing that a bill we had been assured would go nowhere now seems to have made it to legislative first base. We believe Kadirgamar's protestations of ignorance. Another Cabinet opponent of the bill, Commerce Minister Jeyaraj Fernandopoulle, told us on July 5 that he was also unaware that the bill was being notified. Whether the President was also in the dark, as the Foreign Minister suggests, is unclear. (Wickremenayake has a habit of free-lancing when the President, who spent much of the last week out of town, is not in Colombo.) We will underscore our grave concerns on this matter at the very highest levels of the government.

LUNSTEAD